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Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 07-27-124
Week of July 2, 2007

LARGE-SCALE SHEEP OPERATION UNDERLINES SASKATCHEWAN ADVANTAGE

Inexpensive and plentiful land was the draw for Martin and Louise Catto to move their family from Scotland to Saskatchewan in 1999. The result of their efforts is now one of the largest sheep operations in the province.

The Cattos purchased a large farm in the Lipton area, and, after assessing the potential, decided that the right blend would be grain farming combined with large-scale sheep production.

Martin Catto feels that Saskatchewan should and could rival Australia for large sheep herds.

"In my opinion, we've got a better climate for raising sheep here," Catto said. "We've got a winter that gets rid of all the bugs, and there's no fly problem here like there is in Australia. We have to feed in winter, but it is relatively easy to do that."

Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food Livestock Development Specialist Tara Jaboeuf echoes Catto's thoughts about the province's assets for sheep production.

"We have a large land base to farm and a smaller per capita population," Jaboeuf said. "We have an abundance of feed grains and good pasture lands. Biosecurity is easier to maintain."

She calls the Catto family innovators in the use of equipment, facilities and feed. The Catto flock presently numbers about 1,500 ewes, plus a further 1,800 to 2,000 lambs on pasture.

One of the biggest challenges Catto faced in assembling his herd was simply finding enough animals. "The hardest thing is to buy big flocks of sheep," he said. "We were lucky to find 20 to 30 ewes at an auction sale, when we really wanted two to three hundred. We just went and bought complete flocks from people, and then we started breeding our own."

One of the innovations that allows management of such large numbers is pasture lambing in May and June, to add to the lambing in the barns that is done in January and February.

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"There are two ways of doing it," according to Catto. "You either lamb through the barn or lamb on pasture. When you're lambing through the barn, your numbers are limited by the size of your buildings, and it's very labour-intensive. We were doing that twice a year with 500 animals, so that put us up to a thousand ewes, and we wanted to get more. The only way we could do that was to lamb on pasture, and the only restriction there is the amount of fences you build."

With that large a flock comes some fairly steep bills for feed during the winter, but Catto is using a resource that exists on most farms and costs nothing: chaff.

"We grain farm just under 4,000 acres, and we collect barley chaff, pea chaff and oat chaff to supplement winter feeding," he said. "It is half of our winter feed needs. Barley silage can cost $40 a tonne to make, while chaff is free."

Catto states that his number one problem is predation by coyotes. His current answer is 12 guardian dogs to watch over the flock. He says the key to training the dogs is to make it clear where they belong.

"You just place a pup with some sheep, and once it's an adult, it stays with those sheep. If there's any trouble, the dog starts barking and the sheep all go in a tight group," he said.

"If you have a guardian dog, it should never be sitting by the house, it should always be with the sheep. If you let it stay at the house one night, you'll wreck that dog."

Catto describes the market for lambs as strong, with significant profit margins available. He says the Saskatchewan advantage is starting to be noticed in Scotland and Britain, and expects to see more families staking their future here on the land in the coming years.

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CAMELINA OFFERS NEW POTENTIAL FOR SASKATCHEWAN PRODUCERS

Although camelina is not a new crop, Saskatchewan farmers have grown it sparingly over the years because of its relatively small market.

But, the expansion of the biofuel and health food industries has generated new interest in the crop, leaving some proponents to speculate that there will be a significant increase in planted acreage in the coming years.

Dr. Kevin Falk with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) recently prepared a paper on camelina. In it, he suggested that, with the many potential uses for the crop, combined with its favorable agronomics, camelina may have a place in Western Canadian agriculture.

Ray McVicar, the Provincial Specialist for Specialized Crops with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF), agrees with this positive outlook. "Growers and processors are looking for new crops that could be used to make biofuels such as biodiesel," he noted. "Camelina has the potential to be one of those crops."

Camelina's other attraction is its possible application in human nutrition. It has a unique fatty acid profile that could make it a good source of omega three and omega six fatty acids. McVicar suggests that the health food industry is currently seeking products that have improved health attributes, which might present new opportunities for camelina.

Although the crop has excellent potential for growth, McVicar says its markets still need to be developed.

"There are a couple of companies currently buying camelina, but it is still a small market," he stated. "If camelina proves to be a crop that can be used in the production of biodiesel, in the human nutrition market, or in skin care and health-related products, then there will be a much greater demand for it."

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While the crop has great potential, McVicar suggests that farmers should first find a market for it before adding it to their rotation.

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THINK OF THE BEES BEFORE YOU SPRAY

As pesticide spraying hits full swing in Saskatchewan, an expert in apiculture is reminding producers to keep pollinators in mind before they spray.

While Saskatchewan has not seen the kind of bee colony collapses that have impacted bee keepers in other provinces and U.S. states, the damage from insecticide application can take a toll on both honey production and pollination benefits.

Apiculturist John Gruszka with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food says timing is a big factor.

"We are most concerned about pesticide application in July and August, when our honey crop is being produced and our colonies are at maximum population," he said. "To lose those insects will have a direct and severe impact on honey production."

Gruszka says the resulting loss in production is worse than most would think.

"If the damage is severe enough, you may lose the entire field population, and it will be two weeks before the next bees are ready to take over. If this happens in the middle of July, you have lost potentially 50 or 60 pounds of honey production, and that is significant," he noted.

Gruszka concedes farmers have to be able to control pests as the need arises, but a few simple adjustments can help limit the risk of accidentally killing bees.

"What farmers can do is spray late in the evening or early in the morning when the majority of the bees are in the hive. They can also use insecticides that have the least residuals. The worst, of course, is when spraying takes place in the middle of the afternoon.

It is important to talk to the beekeeper if you anticipate the need to carry out control measures for crop insect pests. With some advance warning, the beekeeper can work with the crop producer to minimize damage to the bee operation.

(more)

Saskatchewan produces some of the highest quality honey in the world. The province's northern location and long, warm summer days, coupled with its skilled bee keepers, help to produce more honey per hive than any jurisdiction in Canada.

The province has about 1400 beekeepers and approximately 100,000 hives. On average the Province produces about 18.5 million pounds of honey annually.

In addition to honey production, the bee industry is important for pollination of flowering crops whether that is a crop like canola or specialty crops like borage, fruit and vegetables.

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LEADING ANIMAL RESEARCHER HONOURED BY U OF S

A long-time teacher and researcher at the University of Saskatchewan's Western College of Veterinary Medicine has been honoured for his ground-breaking work in animal and human reproductive science.

Dr. Gregg Adams received the university's Distinguished Researcher Award during the spring convocation.

Dr. Adams has been associated with the college since receiving his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree there in 1982. He is currently part of the college's reproductive health and medical imaging group.

"We have one of the strongest reproductive science and medical groups in the world," Adams said. "This really represents the strength of the group I'm involved with, and I'm really pleased and proud of that."

In receiving the award, Adams was specifically cited for his work in applying research developed with cattle to the human reproductive system.

"We've developed animal models, particularly the bovine model, of ovarian function and have translated that into human studies," he said. "That has resulted in some important breakthroughs in understanding ovarian function in women."

Those discoveries led to his work being recognized as a top science story by *Discover* magazine.

Adams makes it clear that his passion is not pure research, but also its practical application. He is very proud of the way the work has been applied in the field.

"We now have techniques where we can synchronize the cycle to the day. Artificial insemination has not been used optimally in beef cattle because most producers don't have the time and energy to detect estrus and have their animals inseminated at the appropriate time," Adams said.

(more)

"Now we have a tool where the producer can say, 'I want to breed my animals at 2:30 next Tuesday.' We've shown that fertility from that fixed-time insemination is as good as natural mating. That's a tremendously valuable and useful thing for producers."

Adams' current passion is the application of knowledge to be gained through the Canadian Light Source synchrotron, where his work led to the assignment of a beam line to health sciences projects.

"This is one of only three dedicated bio-medical beam lines in the world," he noted. "It will allow us to do some very exciting research on animals as small as mice and as large as cattle, and maybe even a buffalo someday."

Adams looks forward to applying synchrotron technology to his passion for animal reproduction.

"What I would like to do is image the egg inside the follicle, inside the ovary, inside the cow," he stated. "I'm interested in looking at the characteristics of a good egg, versus one that won't be able to be fertilized and develop into a calf. The ability to look at this in a live animal is very powerful and important to us."

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IRRIGATION RESEARCH AND DEMONSTRATION SHOWCASE UPCOMING

The annual Irrigation Field Day Tour and Trade Show is set for July 12 at the Canada-Saskatchewan Irrigation Diversification Centre (CSIDC) near Outlook.

As CSIDC's main "technology transfer" event, the tour and trade show is put on each year to showcase the centre's applied research and various demonstrations.

"The event is a way to inform people of the new and exciting research we are doing here at the centre," said Gail Dyck, an irrigation agrologist and chair of the organizing committee.

The theme for this year's session is "Food and Fuel." A keynote presentation will be conducted by representatives from both the federal and provincial governments.

The event will also feature three identical tours held throughout the day at 8:45 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. The highlights include specialty crops such as strawberry crowns and potatoes, crop varieties for ethanol production, irrigation systems and water management, organic vegetable production and a fruit orchard. Different irrigation systems and their water management aspects will be identified along the way.

The trade show will include a wide variety of agri-businesses, many of which are connected to irrigation. Participants will be able to browse the displays throughout the day.

Dyck encourages any individuals wishing to hear more about irrigation to attend the event, as well as producers interested in CSIDC's latest research.

"Individuals will be able to gather the scope of what the CSIDC does, and to learn about some of the exciting new opportunities related to irrigation agriculture" Dyck noted.

The CSIDC promotes crop diversification and sustainable irrigation to Saskatchewan producers and industry. Through market-driven research and demonstration projects, CSIDC responds to farmer and industry needs to improve the sustainability and profitability of farms.

(more)

CSIDC investigates and demonstrates new crops, technologies and management techniques that assist Prairie producers in adopting practices that sustain land and water resources. Research also focuses on mitigating the effects of irrigation on the environment.

Current projects at CSIDC include precision farming, lower elevation spray application (LESA) technology, drainage studies and irrigation scheduling.

CSIDC is a joint venture of the Government of Canada and Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, the Irrigation Crop Diversification Corporation (ICDC) and the Saskatchewan Irrigation Projects Association (SIPA).

Admission to the Irrigation Field Day Tour and Trade Show is free.

For more information, contact the CSIDC office at (306) 867-5400, by visiting www.agr.gc.ca/pfra/csidc/csidc.htm, or by visiting the ICDC/SIPA website at www.irrigationsaskatchewan.com.

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